Christian Community

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Christian Social Action In The Evangelical And Reformed Church

WHAT?—NO PROBLEMS!

By Herman F. Reissig

The question was asked, during panel discussion, by an able and conscientious minister. "Our church," he said, "is situated in a prosperous community where there seem to be no particularly serious problems. If we had a social action committee, what issues would you suggest we study?" This minister was not the first to ask the question. You get the picture: a pleasant, prosperous neighborhood; no slums, no racial problem, good schools, no invasion by saloons or gambling joints. Some personal problems, of course, but not bad social conditions. What in the world is there for a social action group to do?

In fairness, the answer ought to begin by recognizing a considerable degree of virtue in some of our American communities. If a community consists of decent, law-abiding men and women, good homes, good schools, without overt social antagonisms, that is something to be thankful for. One shouldn't wish for slums or racial difficulties just so a social action committee will have something to do! But the feeling that everything seems to be in pretty good shape and, therefore, we don't really need social action in our church is, on second thought, one of the most disturbing commentaries on the kind of Christianity taught in some of our churches. It is, in fact, frightening. For one thing, it says that we have succumbed to the subtle temptations of prosperity and respectability. For the high demands of the Christian faith we have substituted the easy standards of conventional decency. The New Testament seems to say that in such a community the soul is in more danger—because the danger is less obvious—than in places where sin is flagrant and grossly menacing.

Two-thirds of the world is hungry—and "we have no problems!" Billions of dollars and immeasurable human energy are concentrated on perfecting instruments of mass murder—and "we have no problems!" Americans seem unable to build enough mental hospitals to care for the people who have serious psychological difficulties—and "we have no problems!" A few miles from the loveliest community anywhere are housing conditions that are a menace to physical and spiritual health—and "we have no problems!' In our country, if not in our immediate neighborhood, Negroes and white people look at each other with deep fear and resentment and American freedoms, not to speak of Christian principles, are flagrantly violated—but "we have no problems!" In these lovely communities some very pleasant and well-intentioned people surround themselves with more and more of the conveniences and gadgets of comfortable living, as many as they can pay for or put on charge accounts, while millions of their fellowmen all over the world beg for food, medicine, education that they will never get —but "we have no problems!"

Has the Kingdom of God come, then, in these communities and in the earth? What have we been teaching about Christian love and divine righteousness and the demands of a just God, that some of us can think we are getting along quite well, thank you? As one minister said, seeing the fact of the matter even if he wasn't going to do much about it, "My people are lovable pagans." The first job of social action in such churches is to keep talking about cases of want and injustice until the comfortable, self-satisfied atmosphere is disturbed by the beginnings of contrition and the sense of responsibility. And the first job of the minister is to see the Lord of love "high and lifted up," and help his people to see him, until the well-fed deacon and his well-dressed wife are ready to cry, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

—In the September, 1956 issue of *Social Action*.

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Christian Social Action as a special concern of the Evangelical and Reformed Church goes back to the two predecessor bodies. The Evangelical Synod of North America had a Commission on Christianity and Social Problems (established in 1913 as a Commission on the Common Welfare), and the Reformed Church in the United States had related to its Board of Home Missions a Committee on Social Service (appointed in 1914). Both of these agencies concerned themselves with the social, economic, and political responsibilities confronting the Christian Church, and both denominations took active part in the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America which contributed so much to the articulation of Christian social concern.

Shortly after the union of 1934, in 1935 the two existing committees formed a Joint Commission on Christian Social Action. Succeeding General Synods gave this Commission official recognition and support and established its status in the Constitution and By-Laws which became effective in 1940. In 1944 the General Synod provided for the selection of an executive secretary, and two additional staff members were subsequently authorized. A notable step in the history of the denomination was its solemn repudiation of segregation in church and society and the establishment of a race relations program in cooperation with the Board of National Missions.

The Commission on Christian Social Action is composed of twelve persons, of whom five must be pastors. The General Synod elects eight of these (half that number at each session, for

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a term of six years), and these choose four additional persons. Every effort is made to maintain vocational and geographic balance, so as to give representation to various sections of the Church as well as to diverse economic interests and areas of concern. The members of the Commission elect their officers, determine policy, plan program, appoint and supervise the staff in administering the program.

In addition to these twelve active members, the Commission regularly enjoys consultation with the Christian Social Action chairman of the Women's Guild as well as with representatives of the General Council, the Youth Fellowship, the Churchmen's Brotherhood, and other boards or departments of boards concerned with an effective witness in our common life.

Organization and Function

The Commission presently has standing committees on international relations, religion and public education, and race relations. In addition to these areas of concern, it has responsibility for the family, community welfare, economic life, and Christian citizenship.

It exercises its ministry to our churches and members through four major channels: through its publications and the distribution of informational materials produced by other agencies; through conferences and institutes on various fields of social action; through its official statements and recommendations for public policy or citizen action; through the services of its staff. In addition, it has undertaken, often at the request of the General Synod, a number of special projects and services. Among these are registration and counselling of conscientious objectors, a survey of labor practices in the church, preparation of a statement on interfaith marriage, and study of the inclusion of ministers in Old Age and Survivors' Insurance.

The Commission cooperates to the greatest degree possible with the appropriate departments of the National Council of Churches. For a number of years it has participated in the Interdenominational Churchmen's Washington Seminar and the Interdenominational Institutes on Racial and Cultural Relations; and it has cooperated with the Council for Social Action of the Congregational Christian Churches in an annual United Nations—World Order Seminar and in other projects.

Synodical Committees

The social witness of the church can be aided by a denominational agency such as the Commission on Christian Social Action. But this is only one unit in the program. To deal effectively with issues and to marshal leadership depends in large measure upon the work which is carried on by committees on Christian

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COMMISSION ON CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION

12 Members: Ministers – Laymen – Women

8 Elected by the General Synod ★ 4 Elected by the 8

Plan the Program ★ Determine Policies ★ Elect the Staff

PURPOSE: ***To assist the Evangelical and Reformed Church, its synods, agencies, congregations, ministers, and members in bringing our Christian faith effectively to bear upon the problems of the world in which we live.***

AREAS OF CONCERN:

- Home and Family
- Community Welfare
- Public Education
- Race Relations
- Economic Life
- Christian Citizenship
- International Affairs

WAYS OF WORKING:

- Policy Statements
- Publications
- Conferences
- Staff Consultation
- Service to Local Congregations
- Cooperation with Synodical Committees
- Consultation with Women's Guild, Churchmen's Brotherhood, and other Denominational Agencies
- Interdenominational Cooperation

STAFF:

Executive Secretary
Huber F. Klemme

Field Secretary
F. Nelsen Schlegel

Race Relations Secretary
Chester L. Marcus

HEADQUARTERS:

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Cleveland 13, Ohio

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Social Action in each of the thirty-four synods into which the church is districted.

The By-Laws of the Evangelical and Reformed Church provide that the synodical committee on Christian Social Action shall consist of "not less than two ministers and one lay member," elected by the synod for a term of three years in such wise that the terms of one-third of their number expire each year. The Commission has recommended, and many synods have taken corresponding action, that the committee should be increased to five or more, with due regard for geographical distribution among the various regions of the synod, and that the chairman of the Christian Social Action Department of the synodical Women's Guild should be invited to meet with the committee regularly if she is not already an elected member of the committee.

The functions and opportunities of such a committee are many, and increasingly both their members and the constituency of their synods are realizing this. The following list indicates some of these responsibilities and possibilities:

Offer a report and recommendations at the spring meeting of the synod.

Assist in organizing committees on Christian social action in local churches.

Send occasional communications to pastors concerning social problems affecting the community, region, state, or nation.

Enlist attendance at denominationally sponsored seminars and institutes.

Arrange institutes and field itineraries for the staff of the Commission on Social Action.

Provide a speakers' bureau of informed ministers and lay people within the synod.

Cooperate in stimulating and implementing social concern of local and state councils of churches.

And in the Local Church

But in the last analysis, the test of social action is in the local congregation and the local community. The national agency exists to serve the pastors and lay leaders who make the effort here. Many congregations are becoming aware of the challenges they face and are looking for help. More than 200 have appointed standing committees on Christian Social Action. Others rely on interested individuals to exercise leadership. Many congregations and groups call on the Commission for staff service during the course of a year. One third of our churches participated in the Emphasis on Christian Commitment and Christian Community, and others are currently using this program. Thousands of persons are using Christion Social Action publications. A goodly number are attending seminars and conferences, and more would like to. The Women's Guild is doing an especially good job in arousing concern and bringing information to its members.

In the September issue of CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY we outlined some of the functions of the local congregation in relation to its community. Further suggestions are to be found in past and future issues. Two handbooks, *Some ABC's of Christian Social Action* (20c) and *The Social Action Committee in the Local Congregation* (10c), offer counsel in organizing a local social action program. Both are available with much additional help in our General Social Action Packet (No. 9), at cost of only one dollar.

NEWS FROM THE FIELD

The Evangelical and Reformed churches of Louisville have set something of a precedent in our denomination. Having been engaged for the past several years in a thorough-going self-study process under the direction of Dr. John Shope, Secretary of City Church and Urban Strategy for the Board of National Missions, they spent an entire Saturday—pastors *and* consistorymen or church council members — considering the recommendations of their own strategy committee with reference to parish boundaries, church relocation, and program planning. Invited to be present to react to these plans and offer suggestions were representative of various denominational boards and agencies —evangelism, missions, youth work, Christian social action—and representatives of local church, welfare, and community agencies. Thus needs and program possibilities in inner-city, residential, and suburban communities could be considered in the light of the many interests and responsibilities which come to a focus in the local church.

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Following a series of helpful institutes and field trips in South Illinois, South Indiana, Michigan-Indiana, and Potomac synods, members of the staff sat down for a day with chairmen of the synodical committees on Christian Social Action in the synods to which the Commission is "zoned" during 1956-57. Representatives of the eastern group of synods met in Reading on May 28 and the north central synod committees in Milwaukee on June 19. As a result of this cooperation Associate Secretaries Schlegel and Marcus have dates and plans for service to the churches in these synods well outlined for the coming winter and spring.

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Philadelphia Synod got off to an early start with a series of regional workshops early in September in Philadelphia, Souderton, and Collegeville. The new film, *A Train of Action,* was used here to stimulate thinking about local church social action programs. One local church social action chairman wrote glowingly:

"I want to express my personal appreciation and that of our Committee for the visit last week in Philadelphia (of the Reverend Messrs. Marcus and Schlegel). Eight of our congregation went to the Workshop put on for our area and thoroughly enjoyed it — and learned something. The film *Train of Action,* was shown there, and I want to congratulate you and your associates on having produced a fine film. We are looking forward to showing it to our own congregation at a later date."

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Potomac Synod is planning a series of four Sunday evening meetings for the Christian Social Action committees of its churches and others, at Grace Church, Washington, November 18 through December 9. Two evenings will be devoted to race relations and one each to alcoholism and the needs of the aging.

General Synod Statement For Free Distribution

The statement on *A Christian Approach to Race Relations,* adopted by the General Synod in September, has been printed and is now available from the Commission on Christian Social Action.

As recommended by the committee which reviewed the program and report of the Commission at Lancaster, the General Synod in adopting the statement gave evidence of a desire that it should be widely circulated, read, and studied in our churches and directed that the Commission should distribute it.

It is printed as a four-page leaflet, 8½ by 5½ inches, with a "Call to Devout and Prayerful Study" commending its use, prepared by President James E. Wagner.

In order that every congregation in every section of the country may have opportunity to place it in the hands of every officer and member, the Commission is making it available free upon request to all of our churches.

New Handbook Coming

The social resolutions adpoted by the General Synod of 1956 will soon be available from the office of the Commission on Christian Social Action under the title, *Christian Social Action at the General Synod.* In addition to the full text of the statements adopted by the General Synod, the handbook will contain interpretive material from the report of the Commission to the General Synd and suggested steps and resource materials for congregations desiring to develop programs of social action and community outreach in keeping with the denominational Program of Advance adopted at Lancaster.

Cost of the booklet will be 20 cents each, or $15 per hundred.

Christian Community

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Speaking of Books

Those who are seeking a cogent, well written, and comprehensive interpretation of the meaning, need, and scope of Christian Social Action will welcome *Christian Social Ethics: Exerting Christian Influence,* written by Professor Albert Terrill Rasmussen, and published by Prentice-Hall ($4.00). Professor Rasmussen, who occupies the chair of social ethics and the sociology of religion at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, makes no apologies for asserting the necessity of exerting Christian influence and has no illusions about the futility of Christian strategies which discount or avoid responsible social action. At the same time he distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate types of influence or "persuasion" as practiced in our society.

A mere glance at chapter headings arouses one's desire to plunge into the book—"What is Chirstian Influence?," "The Sea of Influence Around Us," "Our Oppressive Moral Climate," "Weakness of the Churches' Influence," "Relating Faith to Social Action," "Steps in Building a Church of Influence" — and the contents does not disappoint. The concluding chapters deal with exerting influence "in the local community," "through reconciliation," "through vocation," and "through politics," respectively. Discussion questions and recommended further reading at the end of every chapter make the book a tempting possibility for class use in church or higher education.

H. F. K.

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Protestant—Catholic—Jew, by Will Herberg (Doubleday, $4.00) is subtitled: "An Essay in American Religious Sociology." Its author is a Jew who has been profoundly influenced by such Protestant theologians as the Niebuhr brothers and has lectured and written for Roman Catholic institutions and journals as well as those of the other faiths. A research analyst for a large labor union, he has become noted for his reflections on social, philosophical, and religious problems.

The present work considers the paradox of the contemporary revival of interest in "religion" at a time when our culture is pervaded by secularism. He considers in turn the significance of religion as a mark of identity as national and linguistic marks of ancestry fade; the response of each of the "major faiths" to the changing social scene, and the reactions of the religious communities toward each other. The author does not lose sight of the profundities of religious faith or of the complex of hopefulness and danger in the common confusion of "religion" and "democracy" or the "American way of life."

H. F. K.

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In *Love of This Land,* edited by James H. Robinson and published by Christian Education Press ($1.00), a distinguished group of contributors interpret the progress made by the Negro in America in such fields as education, civil rights, job opportunity, sports, contributions to culture, national defense, and religion. The record refutes the cynical notion that there have been no gains, especially during the past twenty years, and at the same time undercuts any tendency to complacent boasting. It is helpful to have the facts conveniently compiled, and the illustrations by Elton C. Fax add materially to the attractiveness of the booklet.

H. F. K.

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The Education of Migrant Children. By Shirley E. Greene. 179 pp. Washington, D. C.: Department of Rural Education of the National Education Association of the United States. $2.50 and $3.00.

Study of four communities reveals the complicated conditions surrounding the education of a little over 2,000 migrant children. Here is an opportunity for Christians to get a close look at one of the nation's most pressing problems.

Problems of enrollment and attendance, progress in school, impact on school facilities, attitudes and practices of teachers and principals, educational background and attitude of migrant parents, economic factors, are vividly presented. Following the discussions of these areas are recommendations which point the way to alleviation of the needs in each area. The Church should be particularly struck by the recommendation that there be more "activities that increase the migrant's sense of belonging, self-respect, and confidence."

In all these recommendations, it is stressed that the "cooperation and assistance of other communities, state and national governments is needed." One is more ready to take an active part in an attempt at making education equal for all, including the migrant, after he has seen this study of the problem.

Barbara Schlegel